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ABSTRACT

Focusing on activities that can be directly taught as "survival language situations," this journal (1) evaluates what school critics mean by "survival English," (2) demonstrates that teachers can easily pay attention to "survival"-oriented language, and (3) argues that a comprehensive English course enables students to meet all the language demands of society. Survival English is even more basic than "the basics"; it is an irreducible minimum of language needed for survival in the difficult, demanding modern world. The first section, focusing on survival talking, defines "survival situations," offers strategies to help prepare children handle unpredictable situations, and emphasizes the value of expressive talk, suggesting a "playground to classroom" oral language policy. The second section, designed to improve children's survival spelling and reading, presents ideas for teaching children to handle specific reading situations that are likely to arise in real life conditions. The third section argues that survival writing is essential to educational survival and, in some instances, cannot be avoided without some loss. The fourth section suggests classroom activities for countering two tendencies that may inhibit a child's language development and survival capabilities--television-induced passiveness and the fear of math. The final section discusses the limitations of the direct teaching of "survival language," a lesson from Leo Tolstoy, and the creative thrust of English instruction in the United States. (JD)

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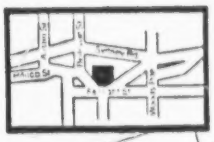
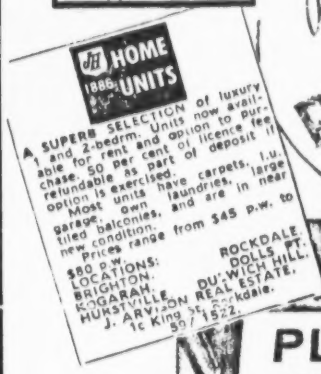
P.E.N. 14

PRIMARY ENGLISH NOTES . . .

Classroom Notes . . . from the Primary English Teaching Association

"SURVIVAL ENGLISH"

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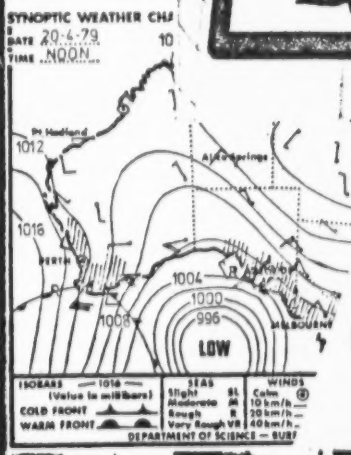

EQUAL PAY FOR ALL HEALTH WORKERS

'SURVIVAL ENGLISH'?

The term 'survival English' is heard increasingly. It implies that there is an English even more basic than 'the basics' -- an irreducible minimum of language needed for survival in our difficult, demanding modern world.

So appealing is this simple notion that politicians in many American states have imposed 'minimum competency testing' on the schools, compelling teachers to devote slabs of precious time to narrow 'survival language drills'.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS P.E.N. IS . . .

1. TO make an honest effort to understand what critics of the schools mean by 'survival English'. (Nowhere do they really tell us.)
2. TO show that teachers can easily pay some attention to 'survival'-oriented language -- as they most probably do, anyway.
3. TO argue that a comprehensive English course will take 'survival' language in its stride by promoting confident speech, keen reading, and willing writing so that children become able users of language who can meet all the language demands that society makes.

In passing, let's observe the impossibility of securing agreement on the word 'survival': Survival in the job market? Survival on the dole? Survival in business? Survival in the face of hard-sell, soft-porn, admen, planned obsolescence, political doublespeak and any number of other hazards beside smoking? We need to survive so many things! Surely not..ng less than advanced language competence in talking, reading and writing can save us from all of them.

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SURVIVAL TALKING

WHAT ARE 'SURVIVAL SITUATIONS'?

The following may be seen as situations that call for 'survival' performance as a talker:

Greeting People: relatives, visitors, children, etc.
Congratulating People; Complimenting People.
Thanking People: in various situations.
Responding to Greetings, Congratulations, etc.
Interrupting Adults Politely.
Making Up after a Quarrel.
Coping with Teasing or Bullying.
Asking a Librarian for Help.
Asking/Giving Directions.
Telephoning: for various purposes.
Handling Lectures, Demonstrations, Interviews.
Coping with Emergencies: e.g. if lost; house on fire; playmate lost; school case lost; money stolen; feel sick in class; need to leave class for toilet; asked by stranger to get in car or go for walk; seized by stranger; etc.

But More Than Specific Exercises Are Needed

Specific exercises — perhaps as improvised drama — can help children to cope with predictable 'survival situations' like those above. But they are unlikely to produce a talker who can meet all of life's (mostly unpredictable) demands. To that end these more general courses of action need attention ...

1. Encourage 'Expressive Talk' in Ongoing Work

Speech ability is more 'caught' than 'taught'. So the teacher's main oral strategy will be to encourage a flow of interested 'expressive' classroom talk (see next col.) whether the lesson is English or Maths or Social Studies. At best, this will be talk in real-purpose 'wholes' rather than in fragmented 'skills' exercises.

2. Remind Parents of the Value of Home Talk

Inform parents that children are in class for only 10% of the total hours in a year! So it is important that they listen to their children, talk to them, answer questions, discuss TV shows, let them handle the phone, read aloud to them.

3. Generally, Build the Child's Confidence

Most important of all is the teacher's effort to build each child's *general confidence.* At the heart of good talk lies confidence; given confidence a flow of talk is invariably assured. The fortunate children who are already confident tend to come from warm, approving, talk-saturated homes. The less fortunate can be helped by warmth, approval, and encouragement of talk in a secure classroom — especially by unstinting praise of *whatever* is done well, for that is a child's growth-point.

VALUING 'EXPRESSIVE' TALK

Children's talk is as much a medium of learning as of communicating. To silence it can mean silencing thinking. ('How can I be sure what I think till I hear what I say?') Much recent research points to the value of encouraging 'expressive talk' in classroom discussions as the means by which children reach an *understanding* of new, otherwise undigested, knowledge.

'Expressive talk' is the kind that is close to the self — relatively spontaneous and conversational. A different dimension from 'formal', 'correct' or 'standard' language, it is the language a child brings to the classroom from home, neighbourhood and playground ... What should the teacher think of it?

Relentless Correction — or Acceptance?

Most oral interaction in the classroom can be seen as informal, very different from the speech of a special occasion or public performance. Its purpose is to facilitate learning. Expressive talk, broadly appropriate in this situation, needs to be accepted, instead of being always subjected to relentless correction of off-standard usages ('He give it to me') — over-correction which can drive children into inhibited silence.

> A speaker who is made ashamed of his own language habits suffers a basic injury as a human being; to make anyone, especially a child, feel so ashamed is as indefensible as to make him feel ashamed of the colourof his skin.(M.A.K.Halliday)

The teacher's *acceptance* of the child's language is common courtesy, and neither endorsement nor rejection. At another time, and tactfully, the 'standard' forms of the language will be taught as forms used by sections of society ('He gave ...,' etc.)...

Towards a Policy on Playground-into-Classroom Oral Language

Observe the child's playground and classroom talk — playground talkativeness but reticence in class?
If so, seek individualised ways to meet the problem.
Accept every child's natural 'expressive speech', and even program to encourage it through small groups.
Realise the value of the teacher's language example.
Draw attention to widespread language differences.
Impart the idea of 'appropriateness of language to the situation in which it is used', e.g. that 'playground English' usually changes appropriately into a more careful 'classroom English'.
Indicate broadly the idea of 'standard usage'.
Show that 'standard' is the language of most public oral performance and nearly all published writing, and that a control of it for these purposes is a necessary part of 'getting educated'.
If 'correcting' to 'standard' form, do so tactfully.
Remember that full proficiency in 'standard' can only be achieved across all the K-12 years and certainly not by 'relentless correction' in any one year of the infants/primary school.

SURVIVAL READING

SURVIVAL READING AND SPELLING

The following round-up of 'survival reading' begins with words/concepts/situations for the very young and shades into the problems of older children (for whom all the spelling is relevant) ...

Around the Home

Recognise on/off, hot/cold, push/pull, 'Poison' or 'Poisonous', 'Danger', 'Flammable' (same as 'Inflammable'), 'Beware'.
Basic food names: meat, fish, cheese, eggs; potatoes, carrots, pumpkin, peas, beans, etc.; wheat, oats, barley, corn; grains, flour, bread; milk, tea, coffee, sugar; jam, honey, spread; butter, margarine.
Familiar brand names: Marmite, Vegemite, etc.
Names of clothes, esp. as worn by the peer group: shirt, etc. but also jeans, T shirt, etc.
Learn names around the house:
(rooms) bedroom, lounge, kitchen, toilet, etc.
(furniture) bench, cupboard, cabinet, drawer, etc.
(soft furnishings) curtain, cushion, lampshade, etc.
(decorations) wallpaper, picture, vase, etc.
(appliances) toaster, fridge/refrigerator, etc.
(outdoors) patio, lawnmower, garage, carport, etc.

Around the School

As for the home (above), promote learning of names for the school's people, rooms, furniture, decorations, equipment, etc.:
(people) Principal, Deputy, Secretary, Aide, Caretaker, Librarian, etc.;
(outdoors) playground, tuckshop, incinerator,etc.
As well as usual labels on items, use notices, e.g. 'Do not run', 'This way to Library'.
Learn to spell the names of classmates.
The School Library. Children's contact with the library should always be pleasant, with emphasis on reading for enjoyment. As real needs arise, the librarian and teachers will introduce the skills of using the catalogue and numbering system, and finding and consulting dictionaries, encyclopedias, yearbooks, atlases, Guinness Book of Records, etc.

Around the Locality

Go for 'reading walks'; street names, shops, etc. Note symbolic signs and discuss their meanings. (And all those variations on toilets/lavatories: Ladies, Women, Hers, Gals; Gentlemen, Gents, Men, His, Guys; the symbols for man and woman; and the collective, 'Here It is'.)
Practise Reading Directions
How to play simple games: ludo, snakes and ladders, etc.; or more difficult, card games, Monopoly, etc.
How to assemble Air-Fix and other model kits.
How to apply mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.
How to follow directions for electrical appliances; heating canned food; using spray cans; using medicines; washing clothing.
And recipes, road directions, knitting patterns.

Practise Consulting Directories

Timetables: rail and bus (work out trips, e.g. to get to X by 10.30 a.m. which bus should I catch?)
Indicator Boards: at rail stations or airports.
Telephone Directories: in the *White Pages* find (a) emergency numbers; (b) an STD area code; (c) number of the local post office; (d) of a Commonwealth, a State, and a Local Government department; (e) how many people called 'Jones' live in your suburb; (f) a postcode, etc.; in the *Business Directory* find a restaurant, plumber, carpet cleaner, etc. who is close to you; etc.
Street Directories. How to use, e.g. (a) How to look up a street by using the alphabetical index; (b) value of the key map at front; (c) other information available; (d) exercises, e.g. work out shortest route from school to X, etc.
Road Maps. How to use, e.g. Work out a family holiday route to, say, Adelaide or Brisbane, noting main towns or scenic attractions.
Atlases. How to find countries, places, etc. and work out distances, latitude, time.
Travel Brochures: Where to find them, and how to work out trips and tours.
Catalogues. Many commercial ones are easily available and can be used to search for goods.
Recipe Books. Consult for a specific recipe or to create a menu for a person or occasion.
Dictionaries and other Reference Books. Dictionaries are the most used directories of all!

Reading Newspapers and Magazines

These popular forms of reading deserve continual attention, e.g. young children cut out pictures of objects which are then labelled, older ones collect material for themes or projects. Children can be given, say, a major Saturday newspaper to find information: about TV or radio programs, cinema or live entertainment, sporting results, houses or flats for sale or to let, positions vacant, any aspect of the news, or the host of other items — from cartoons, crosswords, and comics to weather, wanted-notices and women's fashions.
Note that all the specific reading situations above are likely to be handled easily as they arise in real life conditions by children who love books and embark on wide reading.

P.E.N. # 14 *was written by the Editor, who wishes to acknowledge the great assistance of Lyris Hopes, Lane Cove Public School, who painstakingly collected and classified instances of 'survival language'. Helpful comments were made by Barbara Fiala, Pat Edwards, Barry Dwyer, Norman McCulla, Graeme Watson, and Ken Watson. Terry Jeff did the artwork.*

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SURVIVAL WRITING

THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING

In discussing 'survival reading' we did not need a preface on the importance of reading. Everyone takes that for granted. But the status of writing in Australian society is absurdly lower than that of reading — and the schools, incredibly, have reflected this negative attitude.

For instance, while there are many specialist reading teachers, many 'remedial' reading courses and many reading research projects, there are no specialist writing teachers, scarcely any 'remedial' writing courses and scarcely any writing research projects. Moreover schools spend a trifling amount on writing compared to what they spend on reading.

Can we be surprised, then, that most children pass through 'the system' (of all six states) with a negative attitude to writing? ... Nothing new here. Most of the adult population has never written either willingly or well.

But writing IS important. A non-writer or poor writer is seriously disadvantaged both as learner and as citizen — for three 'survival' reasons ...

1. Writing is Essential to Educational Survival

Learning, both at school and later, needs writing as much as it needs reading. Every subject uses it; some more than others. Major courses and exams are largely passed 'through the point of a pen'. So educational 'survival' depends on being able to write fluently and correctly — and education is lifelong for more and more people!

Writing must be seen as *much more* than a set of correctness 'skills' (of spelling, grammar, punctuation, proofreading). It is primarily a willingness to search for ideas and organise them on paper so as to persuade a reader.

The key task of the primary school is to produce willing, confident writers who are able to write 'expressively' (a personal-expressive style is close in spirit and vocabulary to conversational speech although, as writing, it is more connected and concise than speech). To this end, well motivated writing tasks are needed, taking in a wide range of subjects and wide range of forms of writing. Incidentally children will sometimes venture from this 'expressive' base towards less personal writing, informational or literary, but without pressure to achieve formal excellence.

The second task is to encourage attention to the conventions or mechanics of writing — without ever allowing dull exercises (skill drills) to outweigh, and so spoil, children's *interest* in finding and presenting ideas. Rather, the teacher shows how-to-edit first draft writing for some kind of 'publication' so that it achieves the conventional correctness expected by readers.

The third task is to BEGIN, gently, a process that will continue throughout all education—instruction in the art of note-making, i.e. boiling down a paragraph or passage to its essentials (written, if possible, in one's own words), so that the notes can be accumulated for revision or as a source for later writing.

2. There is Writing No One Can Avoid

To draw attention to the importance of writing, the teacher may briefly introduce writing that all adults face ...

Form filling, e.g. bank deposit/withdrawal slips;
an application to open a bank account;
an application for a money order;
an application to join the local library.

Telegrams, e.g. send a messsage of congratulations.

Questionnaires, e.g. draw one up and fill it in on, say, the class's TV viewing habits.

Reports (many adults have to write them), e.g. by a publicity officer (every society has one), or nurse, inspector, foreman, policeman, etc.

Letters. The unavoidable ones include:

(a) Notes to tradesmen, teachers.
(b) Job applications.
(c) Personal letters, e.g. sending or responding to invitations, saying thank-you or congratulations, expressing condolence. (Cards, it is true, are widely used for such purposes but they are often inadequate.)
(d) Business letters, e.g. ordering, making a complaint.

3. There Is Writing That May Be Avoided But Not Without Some Loss

Lists, e.g. for shopping, things to do.
Ads, e.g. for lost dog; things wanted or for sale.
Petitions, e.g. to secure local government action.
Decisions, e.g. to reach a decision in a confusing situation by writing one's way through the pros and cons.

Notes for a Speech — brief or detailed depending on the experience and assurance of speaker.

Letters. (a) requests for Information, e.g. a tour.
(b) Protest letters to an authority (more than a personal complaint), e.g. on a conservation issue.
(c) Letters-to-the-Editor, e.g. expressing an opinion.
(d) Personal letters, on anything under the sun — and remember that we often *write* deeper or more intimate thoughts than we express in conversation or on the phone.

SURVIVING TV AND MATHS

SURVIVING TV-INDUCED PASSIVENESS

Any language the school can use to counter TV-induced passiveness deserves to be regarded as 'survival English', equipping the child for survival in a difficult society as an active, self-expressive, and communicative person ...

1. Use TV Critically in the Classroom

Choose programs after (discriminating) discussion.
Make these programs part only of wider activities.
Always *talk* about the programs after viewing;
and techniques: TV language, advertising methods,etc.

2. Talk about the Children's Home Viewing

Regularly talk over children's home viewing.
Have them *choose* a week's viewing from a TV guide.
Encourage them to verbalise feelings, impressions.
Question (gently challenge) without denouncing.
Show interest in good programs, or parts of them.

3. Talk or Write to Parents about TV Routines

Explain the dangers of passive view-view-viewing.
Urge parents to set limits, and be selective; and to do some watching along with the children.
Make comments; react; talk, criticise, appreciate.
Show there are many other activities besides TV...

4. Above All, Present Alternatives to TV

Schools most regularly offer: creative play, for releasing initiative; varied drama, for interaction; miming, for empathy; music, for integration; dance, for movement; painting, for really looking; books, for thoughtful enjoyment; journal-writing, for self-discovery; craft, for active doing — activities of all sorts, countering passivity. And all permeated by language!

TV exerts strong influence on children's language — directly, through the words pouring from the box; indirectly, through the passiveness it cultivates in children.

The box does the talking; its communication is one-way. The child is silent, inactive. Because there is no *interaction* (receiving *and* giving) there cannot be the balanced language development that attends the normal to and fro of listening-talking.

TV-induced passiveness also threatens the survival of human qualities which reinforce language learning — spontaneity, inventiveness, the imaginative forming of pictures in the mind, and a readiness to work hard, accepting the degree of discipline needed in learning.

Moreover the long hours of viewing are hours deducted from the time children otherwise spend in talk, play, hobbies, reading, reflection. They are hours when the immensely suggestible child mind is saturated with TV's hotchpotch of information, behaviours and values.

FEAR OF MATHS IS ANTI-SURVIVAL

Mathematics has frightened many children, often for their entire lives, because at some point in early education their learning was turned off by mystifying symbols and meaningless problems.

Children at five are already 'word persons' with an extensive vocabulary that describes their experience. So any new move taken at school must make use of their existing *language* and past *experience*. The infants child must be gently moved *in the direction* of school Maths through special attention to the uses of ordinary *size words*. After all, every child, before even going to school, has already done a lot of calculating of size — intuitively, using ordinary language in relation to real objects. The school takes up at this point, enhancing appreciation of 'ordinary language' such as the following by reference to objects and relational problems . . .

Quantity: one/some, few/many, less/more, etc.
Size: small/big, tiny/huge, thin/fat, etc.
Length: short/long, long/longer/longest, etc.
Height: low/high, shallow/deep, down/up, etc.
Width: narrow/wide, side to side, etc.
Volume/Capacity: empty/full, small/bulky, etc.
Mass/Weight: light/heavy, weightless/weighty, etc.
Time: slow/fast, early/late, days of week, etc.
Area: square, circle, boundary, limits, etc.
Position: near/far, shut/open, inside, etc.
Number: one/once/first, counting etc.
Money: price, coin and note names, buy, save, etc.
Calculation: combine/add, take-away/remove/subtract, group/multiply, share/divide.

To realise the huge range of *meaning* inherent in this (limited) list of words is to appreciate the great amount of *informal mathematics* that children have done or need to do before being introduced to new symbols and concepts under the stern title, Mathematics. Let's remember, too, that the best language-learning and concept-forming takes place in real life 'hands-on' activities.

The Language of Calculation

Society, of course, demands that every child shall go beyond ordinary, intuitive language of size/number/space/measurement, for we live amid a welter of numerals. At this point the primary school is well advised to present Mathematics as a small and specialised extension of language — as, we might say, the language of calculation. Each step that is then taken needs to be rooted in interesting problems.

In sum, survival in society, mathematically, depends on confident control of a range of understandings and skills in number/space/measurement. Such learnings will be developed out of the activity and language associated with solving problems that are either real or close to real-life situations.

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BEYOND 'SURVIVAL ENGLISH'

WHERE OUR INQUIRY HAS LED US . . .

In the foregoing pages we have tried to state in detail what might be directly taught as 'survival language situations' (or skills, drills, exercises). *P.E.N. 14*, we hope, will be seen as a checklist to which teachers can turn for suggestions when they feel that their pupils may be ready to profit from rehearsing such situations.

But each of our inquiries has also shown up the limited value of directly teaching 'survival language situations': beyond *talk* situations looms the need to strengthen the child's general confidence; beyond *reading* situations, the need to promote general enjoyment of books; beyond *writing* situations, the need to secure general willingness to take up the pen on any subject.

Why the Notion of Direct Teaching of 'Survival Situations' Is So Tempting

The notion of a 'survival English' is temptingly simple — to equip every child with an irreducible minimum of language. No wonder American politicians have sensed here a cure-all of the literacy problem and pressed 'minimum competency testing' on the schools! Nor is it surprising that some teachers in the past have been tempted by the 'everydayness' and 'practicality' of 'survival situations' to see in them a way to make education real to children — indeed, several textbooks seem to have been founded on this assumption.

But life is not only practical, functional, obsessed with survival. Children are questioning, curious, imaginative beings. 'Everydayness' does not fascinate them for long. The practical courses become tedious as skills are drilled and exercises repeated. Interest and enjoyment in learning soon sag.

A Lesson from Tolstoy

When the great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy (*Anna Karenina, War and Peace*), established his famous school at Yasnaya Polyana in the 1860s he sought 'simple objects' (cf. 'survival situations') for the children to write about — a table, for instance. Their response was indifference. He turned intuitively to Russian proverbs — often complex, moralistic, adult-oriented, but storyfilled. And the children took them up with enthusiasm: a wave of related talking, reading and writing was released ... He had discovered that a released imagination is the teacher's best ally! In other words, that once a child's enthusiasm is engaged, *learning* takes over from *teaching*.

What Turns Children On?

It is doubtful that Tolstoy would have embraced 'survival language' or 'minimum competency testing'. More likely he would have held his primary children absorbed in writing about proverbs — *and* listening to the stories he read, going on nature walks, working at craft and other activities. Every good teacher regularly ponders the problem that Tolstoy solved in his conditions — *what interests children?* What 'turns them on'? It is a problem rendered more complex today by TV-induced passiveness. (When a recent in-service course discussed this, the answers were so various as to show that every teacher has to make an individual answer in terms of 'What I find *I* can use to interest *my* particular class'. The answers ranged from star wars and monsters to books, mythology and introspection.)

An Enormous Lesson from the United States

Donald H. Graves, a prominent American authority on the teaching of writing, recently completed a major survey on the status of writing in society and the schools of America. With opportunities to observe the teaching of writing in a great number of primary classrooms, he came up with this insight:

> 'Where writing flourished it was but one of many forms of expression. Once personal expression was valued, it popped up in many areas; it could not be contained with writing alone. Nor did writing succeed if it was but one form of expression. Drama, storytelling, music, painting, choral speaking, crafts of all sorts, movement and dance were in evidence depending on the background and interests of the staff.' ('Research Update', *Language Arts*, NCTE, May 1978, p. 639)

Tolstoy, we may be sure, would have approved! And what room does this revealing insight about language development leave for the direct teaching of 'survival language situations'? The authors of this *P.E.N.* conclude that, while attention should occasionally be drawn to such situations, (without ever making them boringly repetitive), they do not by any means provide a cure-all for the literacy problem. More effective is the larger approach: one that sees the main thrust of English in terms of an infectiously enthusiastic teacher fostering confident speech, keen reading and willing writing, especially through activities which release the child's imagination.